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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement submitted by the European Disability Forum, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. The European Disability Forum is the umbrella body of the European disability movement representing the interests of 65 million European women and men with disabilities and their families, a diverse group made up of persons with physical, sensory, intellectual and mental disabilities and persons with complex and multiple disabilities. It is estimated that the population of women with disabilities is higher than that of men with disabilities and that they represent approximately 10 to 15 per cent of the European female population.[1]

2. One of the Forum's main priorities is to enhance the status of girls and women with disabilities in order to improve their quality of life and ensure that they are not discriminated against. Girls and women with disabilities face multiple discrimination. This may be seen in the data and through the experiences of women and girls with disabilities, which reveal, inter alia, lack of education, higher rates of unemployment, lower salaries, limited access to health and maternity services, limitations to their sexual and reproductive rights, limited or lack of access to services or programmes for women in general, greater risk of suffering violence and all kind of abuses, limited availability of data disaggregated by sex and disability and underrepresentation in power and decision-making.

3. Girls and women with disabilities experience even more discrimination than men with disabilities and women without disabilities. The existence of prejudices and stereotypes distorts their image and their own perception of being citizens with full human and civil rights. In this sense, women with disabilities generally lack the effective resources or legal tools to eliminate and correct this discriminatory behaviour.

4. Girls and women with disabilities have the right to be fully included in society, however, and should therefore be considered as active players. Their human rights should be protected and promoted as enshrined in article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

5. In general we can say that gender policies ignore disability and disability policies ignore gender, thus perpetuating the situation of multiple discrimination, greater vulnerability and inequality of women with disabilities.

6. Therefore, in light of the review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Forum would like to highlight the importance of taking the following measures to:

(a) Mainstream disability in the review of the implementation of the critical 12 areas of concern of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and in the Millennium Development Goals;

(b) Take urgent action to raise awareness and develop positive measures specifically designed for the advancement of the rights of girls and women with disabilities that involve joint efforts and oblige action at the local, national, regional and international levels to work together towards the same goal;

[1] European Union labour force survey, ad hoc module, 2002.

(c) Carry out an assessment of social policies from a gender and disability perspective, in order to assess their impact on men and women and to evaluate the benefit of mainstreaming and the specific actions taken for women with disabilities;

(d) Disaggregate data not only by sex but also by disability. There is currently a lack of reliable and systematic statistics on the situation of women with disabilities in most European Union countries and all around the world to guide and inform policy, direct funding and inform service development, resulting in invisibility and marginalization in society;

(e) Make women with disabilities visible in the media in a realistic fashion and through promoting positive role models. For decades, history, attitudes and prejudices in the community, including in the family setting, have stereotyped women with disabilities negatively, thus bringing about their social isolation and exclusion;

(f) Focus on the protection and promotion of the right to found and maintain a family and the right to reproductive freedom of girls and women with disabilities. Sterilization of women with mental and intellectual disabilities, without their consent or without them understanding the exact purpose of the surgical operation, is still common. This is an unacceptable measure that has to be put to an end urgently. It is necessary to introduce legal measures that make it obligatory to have the informed consent of women with disabilities to any medical procedure and to make the necessary legal adjustments so that forced sterilization of persons with disabilities does not continue to be legal;

(g) Eradicate violence against women with disabilities. It has been acknowledged that girls and women with disabilities experience violence in particular ways in their homes and institutional settings, perpetrated by family members, caretakers or strangers. Surveys conducted in Europe, North America and Australia have shown that more than half of women with disabilities have experienced physical abuse, compared with one third of women without disabilities (see A/61/122 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1). Disability should be effectively included as an indicator and in any reports drawn up in order to make violence suffered by women with disabilities more visible. Research should be undertaken to detect gender violence, since many women with disabilities may live in closed or segregated environments, and they may be unaware they are the victims of violence and depend on the person perpetrating the violence for survival;

(h) Design adapted measures in order to overcome the effects of the economic and financial crisis that affect more severely the most vulnerable groups, such as girls and women with disabilities.